

THE SUPREME VALUES IN HUMAN NATURE¹

Philippians IV, 6-7—"In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus."

IN brief this means that the Peace of God will act as a soldier guard against all enemies for those who live in that great fortress whose name is Christ Jesus. When St. Paul wrote these words to his beloved friends at Philippi he had been for at least two, perhaps nearly four, years a prisoner in the hands of the Roman government. The opening paragraphs of his letter reflect some of the moods, the stress and strain, wrought upon his soul in that terrible experience. For about twenty-five years since his conversion he had been accustomed to move freely from land to land as his sense of duty and the call of the Divine Spirit directed him. For about half that time he had been engaged in energetic and triumphant proclamation of his sublime message, the greatest moral and spiritual revolution in history. In city after city he had founded churches, had revisited some of them, had sent trusted messengers hither and thither to instruct and guide them, had faced dangers of travel by sea and land, persecutions from frenzied mobs, prosecutions before Roman judges. In all these varied and intense experiences and thrilling adventures his marvellous personality had maintained an indomitable courage of soul, his great mind had

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wrestled with the most sublime facts known to history and with those divinely majestic truths which created a new era in the relations of God and man.

For such a man what did imprisonment mean—and imprisonment for long years? It meant the frustration of far-reaching, statesmanlike designs, the constant curbing of passionate and unselfish yearnings, the humble submission to an inscrutable Providence, the brave endurance of human injustice.

We can picture that intense, generous, vivid, eager personality tempted over and over again to yield to angry and rebellious storms of emotion. It would seem so right and appropriate and commendable that the powerful and successful Apostle should feel perplexed and vexed by years of inactivity. How often must he have faced the danger of being swept away from faith and peace and joy into such bitter thoughts and feelings of rage! How was it then that those of his writings which are known as the Epistles of the imprisonment are among the most calm and generous and sublime of all writings in the world? What was the secret of that great spiritual victory? How did he conquer those ragings of the flesh and cast the energies of his disappointed and repressed nature into those attitudes and those moods which produced fruits so rich and nourishing that the world lives on them today? The answer is to be found in part at least in the verses before us. For his exhortation here is the record of an experience, as all true and effective exhortation must always be. It is the revelation of his own warfare and his own triumph.

Writing to a city where a Roman garrison held constant watch and care over that section of the Empire he uses the picture of a castle or stronghold to set forth (real poet as he was) the spiritual in terms of the natural, the warfare of

the soul in the symbol of a beleaguered fortress. To make the picture clear to my own mind I go back to the ancient castle of Edinburgh. Will you accompany me on a visit to that home of romance?

Up the steep ancient High Street you walk the Royal Mile till you reach the broad open esplanade, where the soldiers of the garrison are drilled. On the far side of it you come to the deep, broad moat which separates you from the rock on which the castle walls are reared. On all other sides the castle rock rises sheer and perpendicular from the plain and the valley below. The only entrance is here, across a narrow drawbridge thrown over the moat. Immediately beyond it you pass a soldier guard, and on through the arched portcullis-gate, under the iron door with the long and cruel teeth ready to be dropped suddenly if an enemy must be barred. Up a winding stone-paved causeway you climb, with high rock and buildings on the left. On the right over a wall guarded with cannon you look out upon one of the most glorious views of the city and the glistening Firth of Forth and far off towns and green fields and rolling hills. As you go on up the winding road past barracks and offices you come at length to a door at which a soldier stands. A narrow stairway takes you up into a room with another soldier guard. In the centre of the room is a large table. On that table, under a high glass cover, what you see are the priceless crown jewels of the ancient kingdom of Scotland.

On reflection you wonder whether the castle seems to have any other use than to guard those crown jewels, symbols of the royalty and glory and wealth of a king.

That picture may help to make more actual and living the words of our great warrior of the soul, the Apostle Paul. He names the castle, the stronghold within which his life is now kept, and its name is Jesus Christ. He names the

supreme treasure which therein must be guarded against innumerable assaults, the crown jewels of God, the hearts and minds of human beings. He names the powerful warder at the gate, he who can raise the drawbridge and close the gate when the enemy would seek possession of the treasures of God. It is the mighty and calm and invincible Peace of God. He names one of the chief enemies that had been assailing himself in these days of imprisoned energies; it is Anxiety. And he names one of the most potent of the weapons in the sacred armory of the soldiers of God, it is thanksgiving and prayer, a vivid communion with God.

These are all glorious facts, these are inspiring, poetic, thrilling pictures by which our universal human situation and its needs are set forth. We cannot here and now attempt to enlarge on them all. We must be content to select certain features and yet keep the whole picture before us to make them stand out in their arresting and inspiring proportions.

First, let us consider the fact that Paul looks upon the hearts and minds of men as the central and supreme elements of our complex nature. These are the crown jewels of God. It is the possession of these which is in dispute between the powers of evil and the energies of the Divine Spirit. Elsewhere (2 Cor. X, 2-5), in another passage full again of a soldier's imagery he describes the warfare which is now and henceforth the real centre of human history. The question before the world is whether its thought life shall be under the rule of Christ or whether "the city of Mansoul," as John Bunyan has it, shall become the fortress of the enemy of God.

If we look at the story of creative evolution which has transpired on the surface of our planet it is clear that its goal has been achieved in the existence of the personality of man. It is a fact, the supreme outstanding fact, that the human

personality, heart and mind, is related to the whole course of our world's history as in a sense its goal because man is its master. It is man who surveys and interprets and with increasing power dominates nature. He is bringing it into subjection to his own needs and interests, and making it subservient to his will. All science and all art, yes, and all religion, bear witness to the fact that your hearts and minds, O sons of men, are the crown and glory of the process of the ages on the surface of our planet. If we look at this fact from the personal point of view, it becomes clear that the Apostle has named those elements of our nature which are the essence of personality, the seat of immortality.

What our future relations to the physical universe will be no one can say. There our imagination fails us, and as yet our science is dumb. But this at any rate we can conceive, and on this our Christian faith has taught us to lay hold with all the energy of our souls, that the powers which constitute our spiritual being do not perish when our brain ceases to be the organ of our life. And these powers are here called our hearts and our thoughts. The power to love and the power to think—these are imperishable. When the incident called death has closed our earthly career, when our animal instincts have ceased their constant appeals to our interest, our intelligence and our central will, when the world of our sense perception has lost its grip upon our higher selves, those very selves, those powers that were born of the very being and share the very likeness of our God, live on. We cannot picture their new environment in terms of physical nature. But that after all is not necessary. The essential thing is given in the conception which Christ has given to the race of mankind with a definiteness and a force that henceforth must rule the imagination and absorb the passionate interest of the race. That is a life in which heart and

thought, love and mind, shall continue to have exercise. Something will be given, some form of objective reality, upon which those supreme powers can spend their energies and thereby grow in beauty and strength and joy.

It is becoming ever more clear that the history of human nature itself is supremely concerned with the development, the discipline, the perfecting of these central powers—our hearts and our thoughts. The conquest of science, the growth of industry and commerce, the saturation of society with the rich fruits of the various arts—these are not supreme ends in themselves. They belong to the things that are seen and temporal. But they are the marvellous instruments and the glorious occasions on which the spiritual nature of man is expending itself that its own qualities may be brought to perfection. Hence it is that the most thoughtful people are concerned so deeply with the moral and spiritual relations into which industry and art and politics bring us human beings, and with the mental processes involved therein.

In fact all but the purblind are aware that the real treasures of our nature are the power to love and the power to think. All else is subordinate or transitory. These are supreme and immortal.

Here therefore is the central and noblest task of every human being and of every form of education. It is so to train heart and mind, so to practise love and thought, that they shall be worthy of eternity, worthy of God. In the golden days of childhood and youth, when the nature is plastic, when the personality that is to live forever is being fashioned according to the pattern that shall endure, this is the substantial thing that is being done in all our schools of learning. The individual is being disciplined to love and to think, to choose the values, that shall mould himself, to learn the supreme art of seeing the truth. There is the high

emprise of every career when it is pursued intelligently, devotedly, and without fear. He who loves only the pure and the noble and the good, he whose mind has an insatiable appetite for reality and truth in science, in business, in art, in all social relations, he shall live forever. His attainments are indeed woven into himself. You cannot separate the individual and those perfected powers of love and thought. The young graduate is what he has learned to love of honor and generosity and sincerity; and as he has learned to think and to believe, so is he.

And they are the treasures, the crown jewels of God, the costly possessions of His own eternal labor and infinite joy. For these products, for these human spirits that love gloriously and judge truly He has labored through the ages of history. For these our earth was prepared, for these life worked in myriad forms far and wide on the land and in the paths of the seas. These were made actual at last when the reflective mind of man flowed from the will of God, hearts and minds dowered with capacities that are divine. From dim and rude beginnings human beings have wrought, a myriad wrestlers with the mystery of life, through countless patient generations. In every humblest loyal man or woman, in poet and artist, in statesman and philosopher, in prophet and seer, at last in one supreme and glorious Superman, in His matchless soul of stainless love and perfect thought, in His consciousness, mirror of His Father's face, in His sacrifice and His triumph, when God rent the darkness and revealed Himself in transcendent moral glory, the Creator labored to produce hearts and minds that are worthy to have eternal life.

But the Apostle conceives of this vast process of human development in terms of warfare. Elsewhere in a passage of marvellous psychological insight he has described it as a

"war in our members," where the evil forces are arrayed against the higher self in us all and an internecine conflict is being waged. For there are many enemies of the good in human nature, and we are all aware of them. Now, it is evil desires of all kinds that assail our honor. The basest of Neronic fleshly lusts, the rapacity of heartless greed, the sheer cruelty of a purely selfish Napoleonic ambition, all men know in varying degrees the force of these deadly foes. We are invaded in our secret lives by jealousy and malice and wrath, which seek to possess our thoughts and poison our affections. John Bunyan had a long list of these officers of Diabolus and enemies of Christ which have occupied the City of Mansoul. Among the most powerful is one not unknown even in academic circles, where serenity and generosity are supposed to dwell. His name is Captain Prejudice, and he is in command of a troop of sixty blind men.

St. Paul names in the passage before us one of the most deadly and subtle of all our spiritual enemies, viz., anxiety. That is an enemy against which he must have fought hard in those years of imprisonment. It is one of the most glorious evidences of the deep sympathy of Jesus with the lives of the people around Him that He spent so much of the Sermon on the Mount on this subject of anxiety. He knew how anxiety might pervade the lives of all kinds of people. The poor are often its victims. Even the well-to-do might be anxious to fare better and to be as well dressed as their neighbors and rivals in fashion. He knew this enemy well for it sought even to conquer Him. It was to fight with anxiety that He went into the wilderness of trial after His baptism. It was the assault of anxiety that led Him to spend all night in the consultation of His Father before He selected His twelve apostles. With Him the approach of anxiety was a challenge to His faith in the complete control of His Father

over His motives and plans and the conduct of His mission.

I have known young men and women in student days assailed by this fell enemy of our hearts and thoughts. Anxiety about their work, about their ambitions and life plans, about their health, their expenses, even anxiety about their sins and their personal failures, often takes the joy out of a student's life. His merriment may conceal the enemy gnawing at his heart and tyrannizing over the processes of his mind. The crown jewels of his God are in danger of being marauded by this fiend of Fear.

In his magnificent picture of the situation, St. Paul has the audacity, born of experience, born of the teaching and power of Christ, to say that the Lord of our life is able to set a mighty soldier guard in charge of our security. The name of this great warrior of heaven is the Peace of God. Our hearts and our thoughts, the supreme values of human nature, the crown jewels of God, are put in charge of that invincible guardian at the gates of life. Is it selfish greed that threatens to capture your imagination and your ingenuity, is it jealousy or malice that sweep away generosity and kindness of heart, is it evil passions, aroused perhaps by reading some vile story, that have created a storm and blurred your vision of divine truth, corrupted your sense of honor, is it anxiety that has invaded your soul, destroyed your natural affections and turned your mind upon dread pictures of disaster? St. Paul, that master of the noblest life, bids you seek the guardianship of the Peace of God. Peace that shelters purity, peace that wards off anger, peace that stifles anxious feelings ere they become poisonous thought, peace that opens the calm eyes of the mind to the divinest truths and moves the heart to self-forgetting love. There is a most glorious picture of a real experience, a life of serene dignity, of quiet power, of noble affections, of lofty aspirations, where a Presence, a comradeship, a divine Spirit, rules a man's life;

and he calls it appropriately, nobly, convincingly, the Peace of God.

Finally, let us look at the castle, the stronghold in which human nature can be thus guarded, in which its immortal values can be brought to perfection. It is no fortress of stone and lime. It is not, it cannot be fashioned of physical materials. Only personality can deal with personality if the supreme purposes of God and the supreme possibilities of man are to be achieved. And therefore the Apostle names here that one Personality who is of such measure that all humanity can be related to Him, of such a place in the scheme of the moral universe that every man can deal with Him and He with every man.

The phrase "in Christ" pervades not only the writings of the Apostle Paul but the whole New Testament with its influence. All round the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean this fact had already been carried by the missionaries of the Christian gospel. It is a fact which overwhelmed Paul himself near the gates of Damascus, and converted the greatest mind of his day from hatred to love, from fierce denial to exultant faith, towards Jesus Christ. It was a fact which not only made the substance of his own life, his own communion with God, his own devotion to universal human service as debtor both to Greeks and Barbarians; he found it became a fact also for all kinds of men and women, infinitely varied in race and culture, in previous condition and character of life. What was this amazing universal fact?

The fact consists in this, that one Personal Being is related to mankind everywhere, and His name is Jesus Christ. It means that wherever Paul goes he finds himself as it were surrounded like castle walls with all which that name means. The words and the character of Jesus fill his mind with their beauty, their truth, their strange and irresistible authority. When his conscience reproves his past, somehow Jesus living

that life, dying on that Cross, becomes the Voice of God's mercy. When he, the prisoner, looks forward to the unknown future, to execution or release, that Person is already there, inhabiting his future, and he whispers in his heart: "To live is Christ, to die is gain." It is true that you cannot explain this fact by reducing it to other measures of human life. You cannot explain electricity unless by inexplicable ether. You cannot explain life except by an inexplicable God. You cannot explain this Castle of the human soul, this supreme, historic personality who pervades the whole world and today is winning all races to His love, except by calling Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

But He is proved today more widely, more triumphantly than ever in these two thousand years since Paul, to be the universal Presence, the symbol and the expression, the channel of the outflowing creative will and perfecting love of God. His teaching, His ministries of pity, His Cross where "sorrow and love flow mingled down," His victory over death, these constitute the whole fact of Christ. Only the most earnest prayer, only the most eager faith, only the noblest aspirations, only the loftiest thoughts which the human mind can cherish, are worthy to be used by us toward that name above all names.

They whose lives are set within the encircling fortress of Christ Jesus are not free from fierce assaults of haunting doubt or stormy passion or grinding fear. But the ancient promise holds, and is being proved by the living experience of myriads of human beings every day, that our hearts and our minds, our immortal selves, the supreme values of human nature, the crown jewels of God, can be and are indeed guarded in the universal fortress of Christ by the glorious Peace of God.

W. DOUGLAS MACKENZIE.